

# Family structure and Self-Esteem: Do Broken Families Obstruct Self-Esteem in Children?

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**Abstract** - The increasing prevalence of one-parent households and the necessity to study the effect of single parenting on children is evident. There have been numerous observable differences between children in single parent and two-parent households and one of most significant impairments is that of self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual's perception of self, their capabilities and worth. Divorce, separation, and widowhood disturb the family structure and during the fragile period of adolescence, the impacts are particularly severe. This study is a systematic review on literature from 1978 to 2022 outlining the research conducted on identifying a connection between single parenting and self-esteem. Parental adjustment, parental economic status, parenting style, family conflict during and after separation, type of custody, sex of custodial parent, communication with step-parent and perceived closeness to them, family functioning, communication with mother, availability of a father-figure, self-esteem of parents, vulnerability and insecurity of custodial parent, availability of extended family support, and age of the child have all been identified as factors linked to the self-esteem of adolescents in single-parent families. As the child moves through each span of Psycho-social development as envisaged by Eric Erikson, non availability of one of the parents vis-a vis the rest can be perplexing for a child for various reasons. Children from single-parent families experience obstacles that children from two-parent families mostly due to financial and emotional gap caused by non availability of a dual bond emotional anchor expected to be available as a social norm. There are mitigating factors like parental optimism and support and several interventions seem to have positive impacts on the self-esteem of these children. Future research should be directed at identifying causal relationships and understanding the changes in self-esteem over time through longitudinal studies.

**Index Terms** - Adolescents, Family Structure, Self-esteem, Single Parenting, One-Parent Households

## I. INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of one-parent households (OPHs) has doubled since the 1990s. About 7.5% of households in India are sustained by a single parent. Such statistics make it impossible to ignore the impact of single parenting on children and their development. These children undoubtedly experience different social circumstances than kids who live in conventional two-parent households (TPHs), and they consequently grow up in a different setting. By comparing the social circumstances of both the households, the children from OPHs have to overcome the difficulties that children from TPHs do not have to.

Children reared by single mothers tend to have more adolescent deviance (Dornbusch et. al., 1985) and they score lower on scales of self-concept (Raschke & Raschke, 1979). The effects were not just short term. Studies show that even 7-years after divorce, children showed increased levels of stress and were more likely to have behavioural problems (Gringlas, M., & Weinraub, M., 1995). Several studies have found a causative relationship between families with an absent parental figure and social issues faced by children (Pharaoh, 2004; Symeon 2007; Davis, 2011; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Roska and Potter (2011) reported that academic difficulties were more likely to affect kids from single-parent households and divorced families and the time spent by the parent with their child had the most profound impact. Younger children tend to have more stress and anxiety, but once they understand they report fewer problems than older children as they are able to adapt to the situation better. Studies also indicate that boys tend to be more susceptible to behavioural problems than girls (Amato, 2005 and Hetherington et. al., 1998). Jackson et. al. (2010) found that external behavior problems like destruction of property, aggression and acting out, tends to be a result of higher stress levels among single parents. Internalizing behaviours like anxiety, depression and withdrawal, that are a result of excessive emotional control are more common in children of OPHs (Holden, 1997).

Whether one looks at the issue of one parent household through Bandura or Erickson's lens of psychosocial development, the link between environment and behavior is clear. Erickson believed conflicts must be resolved at each stage for healthy development (Santrock,

2006). Identity vs confusion is the conflict in the teen years according to him, and this is mitigated by family structure, peers and school environment. Bandura (1977) believed that since behavior is learnt by observation, the environment and particularly family structure and dynamics play an important role in the development of children.

The complexity of a child's development of self-worth vis a vis availability of parents for rearing, creates a need for more research into the theme. For this reason, the authors of this paper have humbly taken it upon themselves to shed light on the consequences of single parenting, particularly on the self-esteem of children.

This is a literary analysis that examines the relationship between self-esteem, and the positive evaluation of the self, (Rosenberg, 1990). While two parent families are considered normal, the growing trend of OPHs creates a necessity to evaluate the literature available on the topic. Papers on this theme have been collected, the results analyzed, and findings presented in the following sections.

Family structure in this context must be taken to indicate the presence of one parent or both. The buffering role of extended families on OPHs is beyond the scope of this study. The role of parenting styles is not of interest, though some research indicates parenting styles can also mitigate the issues faced by children in single parent households.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Self-esteem is an important concept in social psychology (Baumeister, 1993). It was the focus of Rosenberg (1976 and 1979) who created probably the most successful scale to measure self-concept. He defined self-esteem as possessive an optimistic or pessimistic attitude toward the self (1965) and later modified this definition — self-esteem was defined as an individual's overall positive evaluation of oneself (1990). It can also be defined as the degree to which an individual sees themselves as capable. The second definition is usually described by scholars as efficacy-based self-esteem. Worth-based self-esteem, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which individuals feel they are a person of value (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2011).

Self-esteem in research can be conceptualized in three ways. First as a buffer for the self in providing protection from detrimental life experiences (Longmore & DeMaris 1997; Pearlin & Schooler 1978; Spencer, Josephs & Steele 1993; Thoits 1994). Another way to examine self-esteem is to investigate it as a self-motive, that is, a positive evaluation of self tends to have a positive effect of behavior. The final conceptualization is what is of interest to this study, self-esteem as an outcome. Several researchers have examined the processes that produce and those that inhibit self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1979; Harter 1993).

Longitudinal studies indicate that self-esteem arises during adolescence, reaches its pinnacle during middle adulthood, and then declines in old age. Adolescence is a crucial time period for the growth of self-concept. Self-concept is a crucial adolescent developmental milestone. (Richman, Clark & Brown, 1985). It is even described as a fundamental requirement for individuals, especially during adolescence (Alami, Khosravan, Sadegh Moghadam, Pakravan, & Hosseini, 2014). Lack of self-esteem is described as the root of several psychological conditions (Lin, et al., 2008).

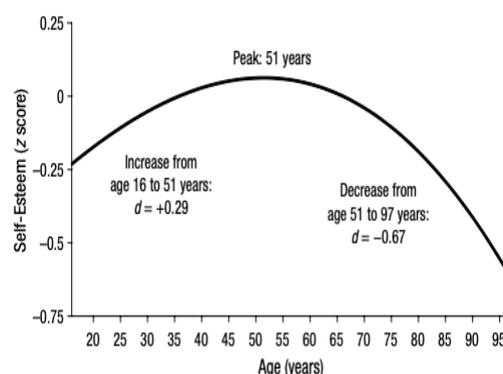


Figure 1: Shows the projected trajectory of self-esteem from 16 to 97 years based on cohort sequential longitudinal data collected from a large sample assessed across 12 years (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012).

Family is the first setting where a child begins to develop and thus it is also the environment where self-esteem develops. Particularly parental influence on self-esteem of a child seems to be significant. Bandura (1969) emphasizes vicarious learning or observational learning and said that adolescent's esteem was positively related to parent's self-esteem. Supportive behavior from parents, that is in the form of nurturance, warmth, approval and other positive sentiments, transmit information about their inherent worth to adolescents, and thus increases self-esteem. This is described in the symbolic interaction theory, put forth by Ellis, Thomas and Rollins (1976). The extent of parental regulation of adolescent behavior also influences self-esteem (Openshaw, Thomas and Rollins, 1984). Family structure itself plays a crucial role in the social aspects of development of self-esteem (Lin, et al., 2008). These researchers believed

that the absence of a parent from family environment upsets the balance and creates unfavorable conditions that may be detrimental to a child’s growth and development according to these researchers. A sense of loneliness could set in and in turn self-esteem takes a hit (Khoynezhad, Rajaei, Mohebe-Raad, 2008).

Of course, the impact of parental styles on self-esteem of the children cannot be ignored. In 1993, Darling and Steinberg conceptualized parenting style as the culmination of parental attitudes, communication style, and creation of an emotional climate for the child in which parental behaviors are expressed. Acceptance-involvement and psychological-autonomy granting parenting styles seem to positively predict self-esteem (Zakeri, & Karimpour, 2011). Further, boys are more affected in “behavioral strictness-supervision” style parenting, that is their self-esteem scores are significantly lower than girls in the same study.

Keeping in mind, Cooley’s looking glass self, reflective appraisals are key in the development of healthy self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). These appraisals are built with reference to parental attitudes and behavior, since people derive most of their knowledge about themselves from their direct experiences with others, (Bem, 1972). A national study by Bachman (1970) found that adolescent self-esteem has been associated with “good” households, which are ones that value close relationships among members, participate in activities together, and involve their children in major decisions. Cooperfield (1967) found that self-esteem in young children (fifth and sixth grade) was related to parental acceptance, clearly defined and enforced limits on child’s behavior and respect and latitude for individual actions within defined limits. Perceived parental behavior also influenced self-evaluation (Gecas, & Schwalbe, 1986). Further perceptions of parental acceptance also significantly correlated with self-esteem (Litovsky & Dusek, 1985; Morvitz & Motta, 1992)

High Socio-Economic Status was also linked to happiness and self-esteem in an assessment of adolescent students, (Richman, Clark, & Brown, 1985). One Hong Kong study showed that thinking styles in adolescents was also linked to self-esteem (Zhang, & Postiglione, 2001). The study showed a relationship between Stenberg’s argument for thinking styles and their connection to SES. Higher self-esteem in adolescents was linked to increased confidence and also improved task and academic performance.

Low self-esteem comes with a host of problems. It is one of the strongest predictors of emotional and behavioral problems, (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995). Low self-esteem also affects the quality of relationships, since they are less likely to be assertive, are generally shy and prone to jealousy. Depression has also been linked to low self-esteem scores (Battle, Jarratt, Smit, & Precht, 1988) as well as eating disorders, especially in women (Mintz and Betz, 1988).

There still lingers the question of the impact of One Parent Households on children’s self-esteem. The following is an analysis of several research publications on the theme and their key findings.

**Table 1:** Shows the key findings of research publications relevant to the search terms — self-esteem, adolescents, and One Parent Households.

S. NO	Authors	Year	Title	Published in	Research Design	Key findings
1	Lowenstein, J. S., & Koopman, E. J.	1978	“A comparison of the self-esteem between boys living with single-parent mothers and single-parent fathers.”	Journal of Divorce, 2(2), 195-208.	Survey. Participants were boys in the age group 9 to 14. Mean income of parents \$23,700. Standardised tests like Coopersmith’s self-esteem inventory Index of Adjustment and Values were administered and interviews were also conducted.	Keeping parental adjustment, economic status, and interest in parenting more or less constant, both male and female parents created a conducive environment for high self-esteem in children. Having a male role-model did not cause much difference in self-esteem of boys.
2	Holman, T. B., & Woodroffe-Patrick, M.	1988	“Family structure, conflict, and children’s self-esteem in Trinidad and Tobago.”	Journal of Family Issues, 9(2), 214-223.	Cross-sectional survey with 300 participants; Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, and Moos Family Environment Scale were administered.	Happiness levels did not differ significantly between children in reconstituted and intact homes. Family conflict seemed to increase anxiety and lower self-esteem.

3	Huggins, S. L.	1989	“A comparative study of self-esteem of adolescent children of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers.”	Journal of homosexuality, 18(1-2), 123-135.	A comparative survey was conducted using 36 adolescents between 13 and 19 years; Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was administered.	The self-esteem of adolescents of divorced lesbian mothers was not significantly different from self-esteem of adolescent with divorced heterosexual mothers. Self-esteem of girls with lesbian mothers seemed to be connected to their relationship with their fathers.
4	Studer, J.	1993	“A comparison of the self-concepts of adolescents from intact, maternal custodial, and paternal custodial families.”	Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 19 (1-2), 219-228.	Survey: 138 intact homes and 79 divorced — further divided based on custodian; Self-Description Questionnaire was administered	Self-Concept was significantly higher in adolescents whose parents were living together. Participants living with a maternal custodian tended to have higher average scores in the test, and also higher self-concept. There was no significant difference in self-concept scores between boys living with fathers and those living with mothers; however, the emotional facets were higher in adolescent females living with mothers, than with fathers.
5	Bynum, M. K., & Durm, M. W.	1996	“Children of divorce and its effect on their self-esteem.”	Psychological Reports, 79(2), 447-450.	Survey. 192 participants in the age group 13-19; Two matched groups — one with divorced parents once living with both parents. Culture-free Self-Esteem inventory was administered	There was no correlation between time since divorce and self-esteem. There was a significant difference between the self-esteem of the two groups with the divorced group scores being generally lower. The lower income of OPH has been pointed out as a possible influence, since it typically means lower material support for educational activities.

6	Mandara, J., & Murray, C. B.	2000	“Effects of parental marital status, income, and family functioning on African American adolescent self-esteem.”	Journal of Family Psychology, 14(3), 475.	This study is part of a 4-year longitudinal study; 116 students were recruited for the study; the Multi-Dimensional Self-Esteem Inventory and Family Environmental Scale were used	Boys with non-married parents seem to have lower self-control, self-esteem and self-competence than boys with married parents. Interestingly the study showed no significant difference in self-esteem of girls with parental marital status. No matter the family structure, high levels of family functioning predicted high self-esteem scores in both boys and girls, though the impact was greater on boys.
7	Pike, L. T.	2003	“The adjustment of Australian children growing up in single-parent families as measured by their competence and self-esteem.”	Childhood, 10(2), 181-200.	Experimental design with 272 participants half with one-parent and half with both; SPCC, SSSC, WRAT-R1 and EHRLSI scales were administered	Boys residing with mothers performed better than girls and boys in father residing groups. There was not much difference between one-parent and two-parent households in academic achievement. Mothers residing with sons were more aware of the lack of a father figure and thus were more involved.
8	Berg, E. C.	2004	“The effects of perceived closeness to custodial parents, stepparents and non-resident parents on adolescent self-esteem.”	Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 40(1-2), 69-86.	A survey with adolescents of two groups — those residing with mothers and stepfathers and those residing with fathers and stepmothers; Adolescent self-esteem scale, perceived closeness to parents, resident parent’s education and contact with non-resident parent were all measured	The study found that perceived closeness to resident parent, particularly the female parent (custodial or step) had a positive effect on adolescent self-esteem. Closeness to non-resident mothers had an impact on self-esteem. Mothers generally have better communication and were emotionally closer, and hence had a greater impact on the self-esteem of children.

9	O'Farrell, A., Flanagan, E., Bedford, D., James, D., & Howell, F.	2005	"Factors associated with self-reported depression and self-esteem among school-going adolescents from a geographically defined region in Ireland."	Irish journal of medical science, 174(4), 17-22.	Survey with 992 participants; CES-D questionnaire and Rosenberg Self-esteem scale were administered; Student fitness level was also measured.	Self-reported depression was high among students with low self-esteem, and those coming from single parent families. Female students and those with lower fitness level also had higher self-reported depression and self-esteem.
10	Elfhag, K., & Rasmussen, F.	2008	"Food consumption, eating behaviour and self-esteem among single v. married and cohabiting mothers and their 12-year-old children."	Public health nutrition, 11(9), 934-939.	1781 mothers and their children were surveyed, and health information was also collected from the Swedish national register; Dutch Eating Behaviour Questionnaire and Harter self-perception scale were administered	Single mothers had lower intake of fruits and vegetables, lower levels of education and lower self-worth as compared to married and cohabiting mothers. However, there was no relationship between mother and child food consumption. Girls seem to be more influenced by their mothers
11	Kim, J. H., & Chung, D. W.	2011	: Effects of group art therapy program on self-esteem and peer relationship of children in low-income and single-parent family."	Korean Journal of Human Ecology, 20(5), 967-981.	Experimental design with 26 students from low-income single parent families; Self-esteem and peer-relationship was measured pre and post the art therapy intervention	Self-esteem of the experimental group increased to a statistically meaningful level. No such change was seen in the control group. Peer relationships did not significantly change before or after the intervention in either group. Art therapy seemed to have a positive effect on self-esteem in young children.

12	Bastaits, K., Ponnet, K., & Mortelmans, D.	2012	“Parenting of divorced fathers and the association with children’s self-esteem.”	Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 41(12), 1643-1656.	A multi-actor design was employed with information collected from currency and formerly married partners with children between 10 and 18 years; 628 children and their parents were the participants; Rosenberg scale was administered, and family structure was analysed.	They were interested in the relationship between fathers and their child’s self-esteem. Non-residential fathers were less supportive and more controlling, and this had a negative correlation with self-esteem of the children. If fathers were highly educated, children had higher self-esteem. In joint-custody arrangements, fathers seemed to be more supportive, and this correlated positively to children’s self-esteem.
13	Alami, A., Khosravan, S., Sadegh Moghadam, L., Pakravan, F., & Hosseni, F.	2014	“Adolescents' self-esteem in single and two-parent families.”	International journal of community-based nursing and midwifery, 2(2), 69–76.	Cross sectional survey; 250 TPHs and 106 OPHs; Coppersmith self-esteem and Robinson perceived parenting styles questionnaires were administered	A significant relationship between self-esteem and parenting styles was found. Widowed OPH had lower mean self-esteem than TPHs. A positive relationship was established between authoritarian parenting style and self-esteem in both one and two parent families.
14	Kinga, T. N., Kimani, J. M., & Muriithi, W.	2014	“A comparative study of levels of self-esteem among students of single and dual parent families. The case of students in selected secondary schools in Nakuru Municipality, Kenya.”	-	Causal-comparative research design; 360 students from public schools; both qualitative and quantitative data was collected.	Self-esteem seemed to be most strongly linked to parental relationship. The study found evidence that parental discord in TPHs had a negative impact on self-esteem. Parental insecurity and vulnerability often affected children and became those of their children. However similarly parental strengths and optimism became assets for their children as well.

15	Mabuza, N., Thwala, S. K., & Okeke, C. I. O.	2014	“Single parenting and its effects on the psychosocial development of children in Swaziland.”	Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 5(23), 2252-2252.	Exploratory design: A questionnaire was administered that asked open ended questions about psychosocial well-being after which a focus group interview was conducted.	Findings indicate that children in OPH in Swaziland tended to live with relatives and get assistance from them. Most children were aware of the challenges their parents faced and some even took on the role of the missing parent. It was noticed that single fathers were discriminated against more than single mothers. Though it was difficult, results show that parents can reinforce a positive self-esteem among children.
16	Lee, S.	2017	“Effects of an interpersonal caring music activity program on loneliness, self-esteem, and the stress response in children of single-parent families.”	The Journal of the Korea Contents Association, 17(4), 219-228.	Quasi-experimental design: 45 participants — 22 OPH acted as experimental group and 23 children from intact families acted as control; Loneliness and self-esteem were measures along with heart rate and stress response.	A music-based activity program emphasising interpersonal care was administered for both groups. The control group showed no significant change for self-esteem and loneliness. LF/HF scores lowered after the intervention. However, the program seemed to be effective in reducing stress in children from single parent families.
17	Turunen, J., Fransson, E., & Bergström, M.	2017	“Self-esteem in children in joint physical custody and other living arrangements.”	Public Health, 149, 106-112.	Data from Sweden’s annual Survey of Living Conditions was used to collect information; 4823 children were interviewed	A statistically significant negative association was identified between self-esteem and living with a single parent. Girls with single parents reported lower self-esteem, as did older children. However, it was found that children who were in joint custody and spent time with both parents in their respective homes did not exhibit much deviation from their peers in nuclear families.

18	Kiraz, A., Ersoy, M.A.	2018	“Analysing the self-esteem level of adolescents with divorced parents.”	Qual Quant 52, 321–342	Survey with 140 participants; Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used along with collection of extensive demographic information	The self-esteem of adolescents with divorced parents was “low” in the Rosenberg scale. If the parents were met frequently and channels of communication were established the self-esteem was not significantly affected. No significant gender-difference in self-esteem was identified. High levels in depressive affective sub-dimension indicates higher risk of depression in adolescents with divorced parents.
19	Unamba, E., Okwara-Kalu, C. E., & Georgeline, I.	2020	“Comparative Study of Levels of Academic Self Esteem and Academic Achievement in Mathematics among Pupils of Two and Single Parent Families.”	Malikussaleh Journal of Mathematics Learning, 3(2), 70-75.	A comparative research survey was conducted; 1267 students were involved; the instruments used were Academic Self Esteem Questionnaire and Mathematics Achievement Test	There was a significant difference in level of academic self-esteem in mathematics among students from single parent families and those from two parent families. There was also a significant difference in mean achievement scores in maths between the two groups. This however was linked to parenting style.
20	Malik, A. S., Javed, N., & Mahmood, A.	2022	“Influence of sociodemographic factors on the social development and self-esteem of adolescents: a comparative study of single and two-parent households.”	Journal of Management Practices, Humanities and Social Sciences, 6(1), 16-27.	Qualitative cross-sectional research design; 320 participants — half from single parent families, and half from two-parent families; State Self-esteem Scale was administered	Self-esteem in intact families was significantly different from scores of children in single parent households. Self-esteem scores of children in OPHs seemed to decrease with age. There was a link between adult education and self-esteem was also established. Higher SES was linked to self-control and self-esteem in adolescents from OPHs.

### III. CONCLUSION

A vital developmental milestone is having a healthy sense of self, and adolescence is particularly a delicate time for this. The preceding sections covered several elements that can affect self-esteem. Poor self-esteem has a number of negative effects naturally such as loneliness, depression and even symptoms of anxiety. The presence of parents, their affection, perceived closeness to their children, levels of education, presence of stepparents all influenced self-esteem scores, as seen in the studies presented.

Divorce, separation or death of a parent can all have significant impacts on adolescents, especially on their self-esteem. These children do not enjoy the same support as children in two parent families get — whether financially, socially or physically (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). However, this is not to say they are at a marked disadvantage. Experimental studies indicate improved self-esteem scores after interventions like art or music therapy (Kim & Chung, 2011; Lee, 2017). Further communication between parents and children seemed

to mitigate relationship of single parenthood and low self-esteem (Kiraz & Ersoy, 2018). Higher scores were also found to be associated that encourage autonomy and enforce authority.

Thus, the relationship between self-esteem and family structure is complex. It is perhaps difficult to answer the question — do broken families indulge into the growth of adolescents' perception of self and inhibit their self-esteem development. Temperament of both parents and children play a role (Kinga, Kimani & Muriithi, 2014), the socio-economic status of parents and their occupation is also a key factor (Malik, Javed & Mahmoud, 2022). A parent's sexuality, the marital conflict before separation and the age of the child at the time of separation may also be factors worth investigating.

Future research in this field should be directed at identifying causal relationships rather than merely identifying correlations. Longitudinal studies to measure the changes in self-esteem over time may be beneficial as well. Experimental studies about interventions to mitigate the lowering of self-esteem will also be beneficial.

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